DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 176 301 CS 205 143

AUTHOR Crew, Louie
TITLE Testing Basics: Battling the Windmills in the University System of Georgia.
PUB DATE Mar 79
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (Savannah, Georgia, March 22-24, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; Higher Education; *Minimum Competency Testing; *Remedial Programs; *Student Placement; *Testing Problems; *Test Validity
IDENTIFIERS *Georgia

ABSTRACT

A faculty member in a predominately black institution in the University System of Georgia critiqued the basic skills examination used as a placement and exit examination for the remedial program. He found that the local committee that developed the test had not defined what "basic skills" are, set priorities, nor specified degrees of "basic." In addition, he discovered that at least seven of the items on the test had muddled directions, and that the spelling test was composed of the jargon words of English teachers rather than of common problem words. He sent a critique of the test to selected linguists around the country and received several replies supporting his view that the test was poorly written. In spite of this, the University System of Georgia did not withdraw the test. However, his efforts were not altogether unsuccessful--officials now require a writing sample as part of the test and have revised it extensively. (TJ)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED176301

TESTING BASICS: BATTLING THE WINDMILLS IN THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM OF GEORGIA

By Louie Crew

The last few months have done much to shake my faith in reason as a vital force in higher education. Perhaps it is just as well that I have a clearer picture of what principles really count with our reigning powers.

I teach in the English Department of one of the three predominately black four-year institutions in the University System of Georgia. In September 1977, I volunteered to teach two sections of composition in our Special Studies Department, a program of remediation in mathematics, English and reading. Students are placed in Special Studies on the basis of scores on a standard placement test. Until the fall of 1977, the System used the College Guidance Placement Test (CGP) prepared by the folks at Educational Testing Service in Princeton. Effective since December 1977, all 31 undergraduate units have used the System's own new Basic Skills Examination (BSE), both as a placement test and as an exit examination for those found to need the remedial program. In neither the CGP nor the BSE is there a required writing sample. Both tests employ the mechanism of multiple-choice questions, sixty of which are the fare on the current forms of the English section of the BSE. All items have been chosen by the System's own Special Studies Testing Committee. Many of these test-designers have had no more than the amateur experience of designing achievement tests for single classes and have had no professional training at all in the skill of designing competency tests. The designers are not listed as the authors of the tests, and no one risks her or his professional reputation on the

CS205463

Copyright 1979 by Louie Crew

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Louie Crew

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

basis of the merits of the tests. The Regents' overseers are interested primarily in quantification and mathematical analysis. Even if the English portion were written in Sanskrit, so long as students filled in the answers, the mathematicians could discover quantitative ways to discriminate between those who guessed excellently well, medium well, or poorly.

Having a local group to prepare the test exploits the System's cheap labor force of people already in its employ, whose only additional compensation is in per diem and travel allowances for the meetings of the Committee. Furthermore, having its own copyrights also saves the System thousands of dollars vis-à-vis the folks in Princeton. In 1977-78, for example, the System had 88,292 regular students enrolled in the undergraduate programs and an additional 8,041 students (8.3 percent of the total) enrolled in Special Studies Departments. Since all of these students must take a placement test, the Regents' testing program is big business.[1]

When the Special Studies Testing Committee actually developed Georgia's new BSE, the Committee never clearly defined what "basic skills" are, nor what they exclude; nor did the Committee set priorities or specify degrees of "basic." Is the spelling of to-too-two more basic than the spelling of ratiocination? Is the distinction between compliment and complement as basic as the recognition of a sentence fragment? What skills are not "basic" and therefore reserved for the credit courses in English? Answers to some of these questions would seem essential before any testers could design a meaningful test of "basic skills." Instead, as one member of the Committee explained to me in writing:

> We were...faced with the prospect of producing a substitute [for an earlier scrapped effort] in record time, and in spite of my written and detailed objections, the rest of the committee agreed to adopt the questions left over from [a] discontinued [test designed] for students

who have finished English 101 and 102 and seven other courses.... Availability won over sensibility, and the result is as you see.

Any savings effected by the locally made examination hardly justify this kind of shoddiness. At least seven of the sixty items have muddled directions. At least nine of the items require students to make recondite distinctions in diction (e.g., fewer vs. less; every so often vs. ever so often; between vs. among), often distinctions that have had no consensus among even the professionals for at least the past twenty years. In choosing spelling items, the testers largely preferred the jargon of English teachers (e.g., villainy and allusions) to the more basic and common problem words, as in the doubling or singling of final letters before suffixation and the ie-ei distinctions, the ible-able distinctions, etc. The testers ignored the very wide-spread and basic problems of making subjects to agree with their verbs, of using the proper tense markers and other standard verb forms, etc.

The testers avoided any united outcry from the faculties by setting a System-wide passing score of only one-third correct. At my campus the student with the highest score of all wrote an almost illiterate final examination essay, and one of the most articulate of all students whom I have taught over twenty years, flunked the test. The many who passed by guesswork are now filling our credit courses without the very basic skills that supposedly the BSE is to assure.

When I discovered how very bad the BSE actually is, I wrote a comprehensive, seven-page critique and fired off copies, together with confidential copies of the BSE, to selected linguists around the country asking them to send their own critiques, even as I encouraged several of my local colleagues to evaluate the test. The examination was scheduled to be given for the first time in December, and our critiques started arriving in late October, calling for the immediate withdrawal of the examination. James Sledd, noted grammarian at the University of Texas,

wrote a three-page item analysis of the BSE, prefaced: "I don't want to be a busybody. This test, however, is so very bad, and the social injustice which it promises to do so very great, that a native Georgian can't keep polite silence." Dr. Sledd complained of numerous worthless questions, observing finally:

> By my count, then, one-fourth of the questions on this "basic skills examination" display no basic skills. But the strongest objections must still be made. First, such examinations lead innocent students to believe that good writing is a business of carefully avoiding imaginary errors. Second, such examinations guarantee that the vast majority of your minority students will be condemned to bonehead English no matter how intelligent they may be, no matter how powerfully some of them may write. I am compelled to pose a dilemma: either this examination is intended as a form of racial discrimination, or its makers are so thoughtless or incompetent that they have invented a device for discrimination in all innocence.
>
> I urge you most earnestly...to do all in your power to have this iniquitous examination immediately withdrawn.

Dr. Carolyn Bell at Randolph-Macon Women's College similarly concluded: "Although I consider myself a conservative stylist and composition teacher, I do not believe that this test will be useful for placement, and I urge you to replace it." Dr. Dwayne Strasheim at Hastings College and past president of the Nebraska Council of Teachers of English, stressed: "I think your efforts have been seriously misguided, and I urge you to scrap your Basic Skills Examination, to solicit the advice and assistance of some competent teachers of writing, and to start over." Many others made similar pleas.

But the first sitting of the BSE was given on schedule. If the public had

half our amount of evidence to suggest that a particular soda pop would possibly cause the back ache, the soda pop would be banned until further tests confirmed or disproved the preliminary findings. Apparently the University System of Georgia is not equally concerned about the people whom it holds in public trust.

Failing to get a hearing by behaving collegially, I went to the press. A reporter for the Macon Telegraph wrote a strongly favorable article headlined "EXPERTS PROTEST TEST AT FORT VALLEY STATE." Actually the experts are from all over, and the test is used throughout the state, but many folks at the predominately white schools have little commitment to remedial education and could care less. Still, the article provoked no response from the testers. The Regents even refused to supply copies of the BSE's three initial forms to a national review board set up by SLATE, a committee sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English and charged to deal with abuses of competency testing. On another front, the Georgia chapter of ACLU briefly considered my request for a suit against the Regents over the BSE, but concluded:

> [Our attorney] says a challenge of the testing procedures would have no chance in federal court. Basically the problem is that the courts in legal cop-outs similar to [those at] the end of Reconstruction period, are saying that in discrimination cases you not only have to prove discriminatory effect, but intent to discriminate as well. That is virtually impossible to do.

However. our efforts have not been altogether unsuccessful. Under our pressure, the officials are now trying to require a writing sample with the BSE in all units in the System, not leaving the use or non-use of a writing sample as a local option. Furthermore, very quietly the testers have scrapped the form of the BSE which we had critiqued. The Director of Special Studies assures us that the more recent versions of the BSE have shifted emphasis from the recondite

to the commonplace, although the newer versions are not available for our critique and by mutual agreement I am no longer teaching even part-time in our Special Studies Program. Clearly the new uses and versions of the BSE are the better for our criticisms, however unwelcome those criticism remain.

Still, the task of having criticisms taken seriously is unnecessarily difficult. The test-making operation is a dangerously inaccessible segment of our "free" society, inaccesible even to professionals with training in the art of test-making. For months our group of critics had no substantive reply to our criticism, except the responses to them unofficially leaked by troubled members of the committee charged to prepare new versions of the BSE. In April 1978 I reported our critiques to a panel at the Conference on College Composition and Communication and sent copies of my paper to the testers and to all members of the Board of Regents. Still there was no reply. The official response already reported came only after I was invited to share my complaint at a September 1978 meeting of HEW's National Advisory Committee on Black Higher Education and Black Colleges and Universities. After that meeting the System's official Director of Special Studies required ten administrators on my campus to endure in my president's office his rigorous 2½-hour, line-by-line response to my earlier 10-minute presentation to the HEW committee. The Director challenged no matters of substance in my presentation, but only minutae. ~~of my presentation.~~ No ¶ It was impossible to resist the inference that his real purpose was to vent spleen over his embarrassment before the HEW committee, where the chairperson had noted that since as Director of Special Studies he has no budgetary control over programs on individual campuses, in effect the Director has no real power to affect the programs he ostensibly directs.

Simplistic notions of accountability may work well enough in the commercial marketplace, but they play havoc when the Regents, who are mainly businessmen,

import them into the learning place. In many ways the entire concept of "basics" has just the right amount of ambiguity to make it ideal for the enslavement of educational bureaucrats. In commenting about a similarly bad test in another state, James Sledd aptly describes most such efforts: "Tests like this overwhelmingly suggest relatively dull middle-class whites sitting in a room dreaming up improbable sentences to catch students out." In view of who pays our checks, that is probably exactly what we are hired to do and be.

NOTES

[1]Additionally, the Regents require another test of English competency, called the "Rising-Junior (or Regents') Test," which must be passed by all as a prerequisite to graduation, and soon as a prerequisite to junior standing. For a fuller critique of the Rising-Junior Test, see my "Lawd, Have Mercy, Ms. Scarlet!" (Black Times, vol. 4, no. 8 [August 1974], 7) and my "The New Alchemy" (College English, vol. 38, no. 7 [March 1977], 707-711). When I urged our Chancellor to take advantage of College English's response section, he disclaimed responsibility and referred me to the English Committee, whose chairperson has never given me the courtesy of a reply.